When sunshine fails to disinfect

There are lies, damned lies, and the expensive public relations of Big Tobacco. **Keith Ng** uncovers how Big Tobacco is astroturfing in New Zealand and calls out the media for forgetting about it.

IN MAY 2010, Rory McKinnon and I broke the story that Glenn Inwood, a lobbyist for Japanese whaling, was running an astroturfing campaign for Imperial Tobacco in New Zealand. Inwood operated a group called the Association of Community Retailers (ACR), which claimed to represent small retailers, but was in fact bankrolled by Big Tobacco to fight tobacco regulation and taxes (among, ominously, other things).

Imperial Tobacco admitted to a Select Committee that they paid Inwood to do this, and this fact was widely reported.

We were mightily pleased with ourselves, but the ACR continued to put out press releases as if nothing had happened. I thought Glenn Inwood was just doing it to save face. I mean, why would you continue to spend money on an organisation that was thoroughly exposed as a fake? It's not like our journalistic establishment would just *forget* that the press release supposedly from Murray of Murray's Barbershop and Beauty Salon in Timaru is actually from a professional PR company paid for by Big Tobacco. Um, right?

Since our original story (and excluding those original stories on Inwood and Imperial Tobacco's admission), 36 stories were published in mainstream media that mentioned the ACR or one of its spokespersons.

"The confession became revelation, then accusation, then speculation, then nothing."

Eight of these were credited to NZPA. After writing about Imperial Tobacco's admission, they forgot about it a month later and started doing copy-paste jobs with ACR press releases. And when they

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Quotes of Substance

“She was some slut then.”
After being prescribed medicinal marijuana, **Joan Rivers** admits she hasn’t smoked pot since the “dark ages,” when she would get high with **Betty White**.

“I don’t know if it’s ever been tested in court, but wouldn’t even passing a joint around a room constitute a series of acts of ‘supply’?”
Guardian journalist **Leo Benedictus** argues sentences for drug offences need to better reflect the offender’s intentions.

“It was there and available. I was stressed, and it seemed safer than alcohol. You’re not going to get a DWI while flying in the dental chair, so it was a drug of opportunity.”
Dr Dennis Bohlin, a Manhattan dentist and an expert on addiction in medical professionals, talks about being a former nitrous-oxide addict.

“I’ve had a few close calls before, but I’ve never been refused service.”
Blenheim’s **John Fast**, who walks with a limp because of back surgery, says he was discriminated against when Countdown staff refused to sell him alcohol because they believed he was drunk.

“The place was filled with people in their 40s and 50s staggering around and trying to relive their youth. It wasn’t pretty.”
A member of the crowd at The Class of ‘81 event at Villa Maria Estate near Auckland on the unruly older crowd who forced the bar to be shut an hour early. ■

didn’t do copy-paste jobs, it was even worse. In one story on alcohol licensing, they took the ACR press release and went back to ACR for more comment so they could flesh out a 400-word story with no opposing voice and no mention of ACR’s backers.

Then, in September 2010, news broke that Australian Big Tobacco spent $6m on an astroturfing group called the Alliance of Australian Retailers. This reminded NZPA that the same thing happened here. The wording they used in that story was “[the ACR] was also revealed to have received support from the tobacco industry”.

In their 3 November story, it was watered down to “the ACR has faced accusations of being a front for tobacco companies. It has said no tobacco company has a say in its public and political strategy of the ACR.”

In their 4 November story: “There has been speculation about links between the ACR and the tobacco industry.”

And then they were simply “retailers”.

The confession became revelation, then accusation, then speculation, then nothing. The fact that Imperial Tobacco said they paid a PR company to run this group simply faded from NZPA’s institutional memory and ceased to be fact. Though to be fair to the late NZPA, no other organisation even mentioned the Imperial Tobacco/Inwood link since the original story.

And that was the last time the Imperial Tobacco/Inwood link was mentioned. There have been 18 stories about the ACR since 4 November. For all intents and purposes, the ACR was once again a genuine grassroots group of community retailers.

Radio New Zealand needs to cop some flak too. Their bulletins desk also churned out eight stories on the ACR during this period, three of them lifted straight out of ACR’s press releases. Their saving grace was that they were short.

The most dishonourable mention goes to *The Timaru Herald*, which ran six ACR stories during this time. It’s no coincidence that one of the ACR’s founders, Murray Gibson, is based in Timaru – just a block down from *The Timaru Herald*. Gibson is often quoted in *The Timaru Herald* as a local tobacconist, even as he recites his ACR lines. It’s not like they didn’t know: they ran a story that was a lengthy denial from Gibson about the Imperial Tobacco links after Imperial Tobacco’s admissions. After this story ran on the Public Address blog, then ran another denial from Gibson.

“Gibson is often quoted in *The Timaru Herald* as a local tobacconist, even as he recites his ACR lines.”

Staggeringly, his defence was, “We [ACR] don’t need any money. We didn’t pay Mr Inwood; we’ve never paid him at any time ... We’ve only received advice from him.” So, in response to the accusation that he is the mouthpiece for Big Tobacco, he responded that he’s never paid the guy Big Tobacco has admitted to paying and only receives

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"advice" from them.

Inwood's firm is a PR firm. It's just not plausible that the "support" Imperial Tobacco is paying for is anything *but* PR. It's not plausible that this steady stream of press releases is written by someone who doesn't do it for a living. It's not plausible that Richard Green, Murray Gibson, Ashok Darji and Dipal Desai all have perfect grammar, write to 400-word limits in 50-word paragraphs, quote themselves in news style and use the Oxford comma.

The words that come out of the ACR are clearly written by a PR firm paid for by a tobacco company for the purposes of fighting tobacco control laws for the benefit of that tobacco company. To report their words as "retailers say" is fundamentally a lie.

It's not a coincidence that, just like in the rest of the world, the ACR main messages are that "tobacco control won't stop smoking" and "tobacco taxes = organised crime". It all comes from the same playbook.

And it's not a coincidence that they just happen to be in small towns. Using small-town shop owners is a deliberate strategy that's been used in the UK, Australia and America. It allows them to easily build relationships with local media who range from soft to downright useless. But their exposure there sets them up as good 'talent', which then allows them to go on national media (like TVNZ's *Breakfast* on 15 July 2011) as good honest country folk.

While this makes the New Zealand media look bad, here's the bad news: even the BBC does it. Last year, *BBC Business* interviewed Debbie Corris, owner of a small tobacconist shop in Whitstable, a seaside town in north-east Kent. On her Twitter feed, she is self-described as: "Owner and manager of an independent family-owned shop. As well as running the business with my brother I campaign on small business-related issues."

The UK Tobacco Retailers Alliance (TRA) also has a Twitter feed: Debbie Corris's. She is TRA's main channel. And who is TRA? No prizes for guessing: "The Tobacco Retailers Alliance is funded by the Tobacco Manufacturers' Association (TMA), which means we can offer a free membership to all independent retailers who sell tobacco, and we campaign on issues of relevance to both their businesses and to the industry."

"The words that come out of the ACR are clearly written by a PR firm paid for by a tobacco company."

Unlike the ACR, they're pretty transparent about being wholly funded by Big Tobacco. Yet, even the BBC didn't bother to Google her name or they made a decision similar to *The Timaru Herald's*.

When I first did this story, I was caught up with the subterfuge aspect. We only had the story because Inwood used his own PO box for the ACR. Without it, they could tell whatever lies they wanted, and we couldn't have known – let alone proved – anything. It seemed like quite a problem, the idea that so much of our news comes from groups that could be hiding all kinds of interests and agendas.

Turns out, the problem isn't "What are they hiding?", but "Does anyone care?"

What this has shown is that, even when the agenda is Big Tobacco's, even when the connection is the second result on a Google search, even when their own organisation has reported on it, even when it's stated plainly on their website, even then, the PR industry can get their stories printed with no scrutiny. It's a complete and utter rout. You know, some of my best friends are journalists. And I like to think that they are the better ones. They always complain that they're under pressure and under-resourced and that this sort of shit slips through the cracks. I'm sure it's true, but here we are, at the point where our biggest news organisations run stories without spending 10 seconds on a Google search or asking if something makes any goddamn sense.

If Richard Green says the tobacco displays ban will cost him $10k for shelves, they run it. If Richard Green says the tobacco displays ban will cost him $27k for shelves, they run it.

How many of the facts reported in our media are this dodgy? And if there is so much that we can't trust – and we can't distinguish between what can and cannot be trusted – at what point should we simply give up on them? ■

Keith Ng is a writer based in Wellington, and writes the On Point blog on www.publicaddress.net.

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